

Talking Heads look preppy, act normal and produce strange music

by David Fricke

Marcia Hesnick



Talking Heads strike an arty pose— Jerry Harrison, David Byrne, Tina Weymouth, and Chris Frantz.

"Electric guitar gets run over by a car on the highway!

This is a crime against the state!

This is the meaning of life."

"Electric Guitar" by David Byrne

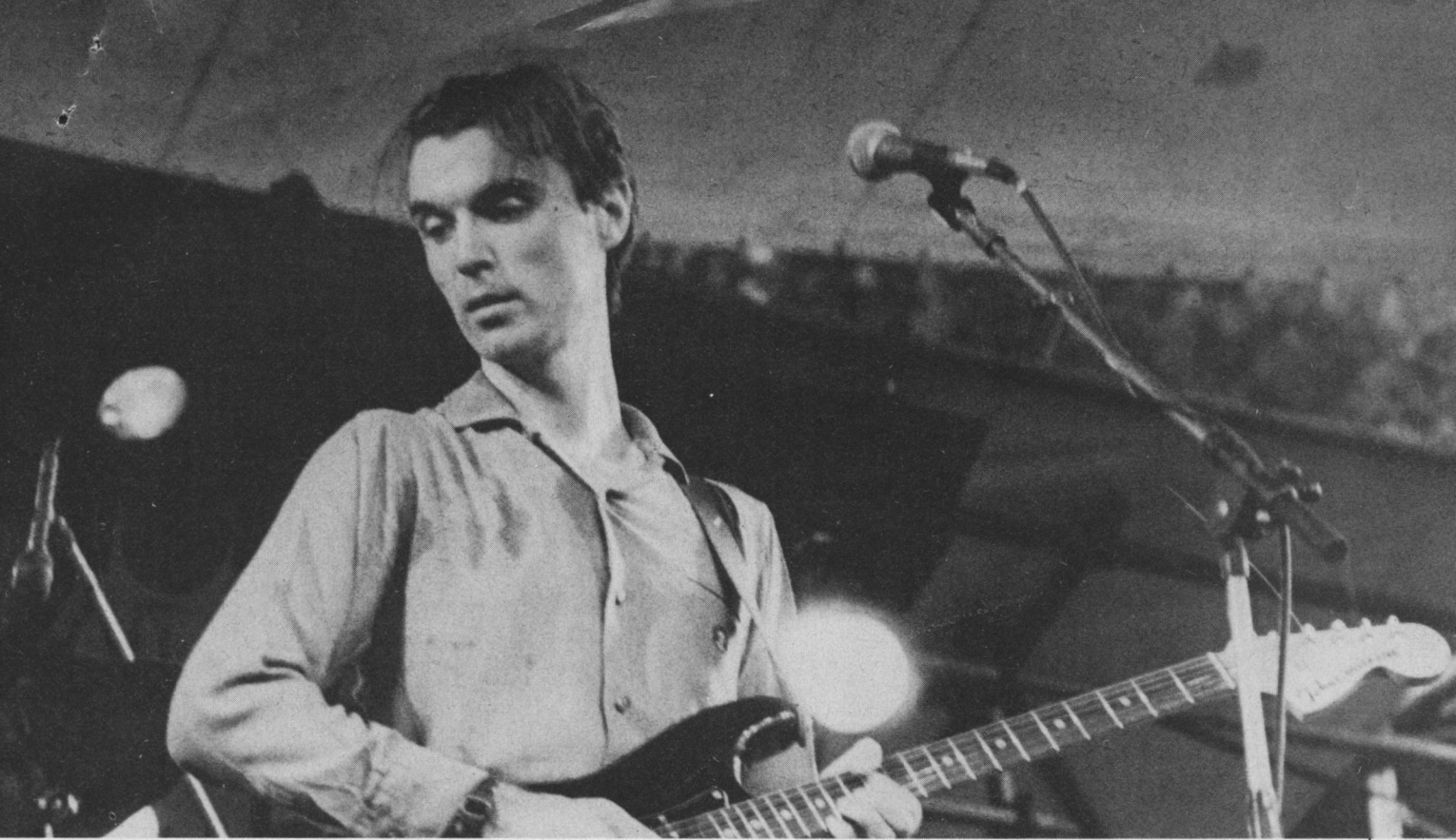
The 27-year-old lead singer, guitarist, and songwriter for New York's Talking Heads, David Byrne, says his ambition in life "is to be regarded as someone who does something interesting. But," he insists in his high monotonic voice, "I'm still pretty much a normal person."

The lyrics quoted above from the new Talking Heads album *Fear of Music* (Sire) are assuredly interesting, though hardly normal. In Byrne's case, normal-

ity is defined as wearing dress shirts with button-down collars and dutifully calling his aunt in Edinburgh, Scotland when the Heads recently played a rock festival there. It is also topping off his boyishly oval face with its dark penetrating eyes with a short conservatively cut head of brushed-back black hair he recently admitted to a British reporter looked "square."

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But the contrast of Byrne's apparent conformity to middle-class fashion with the refreshingly unusual music he makes with Talking Heads—drummer Chris Frantz, bassist (and Mrs. Frantz) Tina Weymouth, and Jerry Harrison on guitars and keyboards—is what sets Byrne and the Heads apart from the New Wave pack they joined upon debuting at New York punk mecca CBGB's in 1975. A collection of former art students from the Rhode Island School of Design (Harrison excepted), Talking Heads play what could be described as advanced industrial dance music, Frantz's strong mechanical beat behind the guitar crossfire as Byrne's songs set forth such propositions as



"David Byrne has not changed his approach to life," says a friend. "Life has changed its approach to him."

Marcia Resnick

heaven as a neighborhood bar ("Heaven") or animals setting a bad example for men ("Animals").

"That was my attempt," he says of the latter, sounding not unlike a pixie on helium, "to debunk the idea of the noble savage, of being one with nature. I liked the idea that animals are no more in harmony with themselves than men are."

If Talking Heads record sales are any indication, however, David Byrne is very much at one with his fellow man. The Heads were the New Wave dark horse of '78 with their Brian Eno-produced album *More Songs About Buildings and Food* and its surprise hit single, an idiosyncratic treatment of Al Green's "Take Me to the River." *Fear of Music*, again produced with Eno, is already Top 30.

But Byrne again sounds the theme of normality when confronted with the rock & roll star syndrome. "I don't like the idea of being treated like a star," he insists, proud of the fact that he still takes his own garbage out and does his own laundry not far from his loft on New York's Lower East Side. "And I think we, as a band, have been pretty successful at avoiding that. Most audiences we run into tend to think of us as normal people."

Until recently, Byrne has apparently done most of the running—away from his fans. As well-known for his shyness

as he is for his jarring art-punk melodies, Byrne has been known to avoid his own backstage parties. Ken Kushnick of Sire Records saw Byrne do what he called a "very un-David-like" thing at L.A.'s Greek Theatre not long ago. According to Kushnick, Byrne was confronted by a horde of fans and autograph seekers but instead of ducking out a fire exit or retiring to his dressing room, "David signed about 15 autographs and talked with people . . . I would have expected him to run away from a situation like that."

Hilly Kristal, the manager of CBGB's who first gave the Heads a place to play alongside Patti Smith, Television, and the Ramones, also characterizes Byrne as a basically shy person. "David was shy then and he's shy now. The others always talked more—Chris was the one who made the song introductions at first. But David is not insecure. The whole thing was his concept, along with the others and he took it along the right track and made it work. In fact, he seemed pretty secure about it from the beginning."

The beginning, for David Byrne, was Scotland where he was born, then Canada and Baltimore where he was raised. He developed an interest in modern conceptual art, hanging out on the fringes of Baltimore's avant-garde community headed by director John Waters and transvestite performer Divine (of

Pink Flamingos). At the Rhode Island School of Design he roomed for a time with Chris Frantz (Kentucky-born son of a military careerman) and Tina Weymouth (daughter of a French mother and an American admiral). Frantz and Byrne started up their own band, appropriately titled the Artistes, and enlisted Tina on bass despite the fact that she'd only played guitar previously.

Byrne admits his music has been influenced by his concepts of art. He decided on the new album's title after reading a book called *Music and the Brain* which discussed fear of music, an actual psychological disorder (musicogenic epilepsy) in which the victim goes into a physical seizure when exposed to music. "I liked the contradiction."

He also used the Burroughsian cut-up technique of writing in "Drugs." Taking a Heads stage standard called "Electricity," he and producer Eno (who tried the same trick with Bowie on *Lodger*) cut up the song and arrangement into pieces, then rearranged the pieces to create a fresh combination, yielding an entirely new song.

It's no small victory, then, for David Byrne that he can record an album of such unconventionally written songs and watch it sail into the Top 30. Ken Kushnick probably put it best when he said "David Byrne has not changed his approach to life. Life has changed its approach to David Byrne."